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How to Study Medieval Philosophy¹

EDITOR'S NOTE

The first appearance in print of this lecture was in Strauss, *Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, pp. 207–26. That first version appeared with the title “How to Begin to Study Medieval Philosophy,” henceforth referred to as “HBSMP” (1989). A subsequent edition appeared in print as “How to Study Medieval Philosophy,” edited by David Bolotin, Christopher Bruell, and Thomas L. Pangle, *Interpretation* 23, no. 3 (Spring 1996): 321–38, henceforth referred to as “HSMP” (1996). Those editors acknowledge the help of Heinrich and Wiebke Meier in deciphering handwritten changes made to the manuscript in pencil by Strauss, and of Hillel Fradkin in the translation and transcription of Hebrew and Arabic words. The subsequent edition represented an effort to produce a version as close as possible to the original typescript, which apparently was used by Strauss to deliver his lecture at the Fourth Institute of Biblical and Post-biblical Studies, on 16 May 1944. So far as I am aware, no one knows whether the lecture was actually delivered, or if it was, in what form it was spoken, since no tape recoding survives; hence, no one knows at what point Strauss made the changes of the main text and in the margins. The present editor has carefully consulted and compared both previous versions and has based this version on both of them, but with the greatest effort made to integrate the better readings that appear in the subsequent version. However, not every change made to the 1996 version has been utilized in the present version (e.g., for the sake of readability, some of the brackets have been removed). With regard to the meticulous notes of the 1996 version, only those judged most significant have been reproduced, but any divergences from the 1996 version that might affect the meaning in

1. The decision has been made to retain the title from the 1996 version. This is on the assumption that, as the title appearing on the original lecture typescript, this is the one that Strauss himself wanted it to be known by. It has been so decided even if the title as it appears in the edition of *Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism* has perhaps made the lecture better known by the other name.

this version of the lecture have been duly noted. Thus, the notes to “How to Study Medieval Philosophy” in the present volume are entirely the work of the present editor, or of the editors of the same lecture in its 1996 version (from whose work the present editor has greatly benefited), and are not to be attributed to Strauss himself.

[I.]² WE RAISE THE QUESTION OF HOW TO STUDY MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHY. We cannot discuss that question without saying something about how to study earlier philosophy in general, and indeed about how to study intellectual *history* in general.

In a sense, the answer to our question is self-evident. Everyone admits that, if we have to study medieval philosophy at all, we have to study it as exactly and as intelligently as possible. As exactly as possible: we are not permitted to consider any detail, however trifling, unworthy of our most careful observation. As intelligently as possible: in our exact study of all details, we must never lose sight of the whole; we must never, for a moment, overlook the wood for the trees. But these are trivialities, although we have to add that they are trivialities only if stated in general terms, and that they cease to be trivialities if one pays attention to them while engaged in actual work: the temptations to lose oneself in curious and unexplored details on the one hand, and to be generous as regards minutiae on the other, are always with us.

We touch upon a more controversial issue when we say that our under-

2. The “HBSMP” version appears with no numbered sections; the “HSMP” version appears with four sections, the last three of which are numbered, with the Roman numerals starting on section “II.” (We are entitled to assume that this conforms with the original lecture typescript.) However, the first section is not listed as number “I,” as one might perhaps have anticipated. The numbering of sections has been preserved in the present version, but the unnumbered first section has had a Roman numeral “I” added to it in square brackets (to show it has been assigned as a section marker only by the present editor). I do so on the model of “Maimonides’ Doctrine of Prophecy,” chap. 4 below, in both versions of which Strauss started the numbering with “I,” although they do so at different locations in the text. Such consecutive section numbering seems have been the style most frequently chosen by Strauss, but he usually began with “I”: see also “Some Remarks on the Political Science of Maimonides and Farabi,” and “The Literary Character of *The Guide of the Perplexed*.” The present editor has assumed that perhaps this absence may not have been deliberate, but rather may have been due to the fact that Strauss did not submit this lecture to an ultimate, rigorous editing. However, some readers may regard this as an unwarranted assumption: the divergence from any supposed standard procedure may itself have been significant, however much it may seem to produce a certain lack of clarity. It is possible not only that this absence was deliberately chosen, but also that this manuscript may be missing the proper beginning of the lecture, in which section “I” was perhaps marked. For that reason, such readers should be alerted to the fact of the absence of a number on the first section in the original lecture typescript, which is (to say it again) why the addition has been highlighted by the square brackets.

standing of medieval philosophy must be *historical* understanding. Frequently people reject an account of the past, not simply as inexact or unintelligent, but as unhistorical. What *do* they mean by it? What *ought* they to mean by it?

According to a saying of Kant, it is possible to understand a philosopher better than he understood himself.³ Now, such understanding may have the greatest merits; but it is clearly not historical understanding. If it goes so far as to claim to be *the* true understanding, it is positively unhistorical. The most outstanding example of such unhistorical interpretation, which we have in the field of the study of Jewish medieval philosophy, is Hermann Cohen's essay on Maimonides' ethics.⁴ Cohen constantly refers statements of Maimonides, not to *Maimonides'* center of reference, but to his *own* center of reference; he understands them not within *Maimonides'* horizon, but within his *own* horizon. Cohen had a technical term for his procedure: he called it "idealizing" interpretation.⁵ It may justly be described as the modern form of allegoric interpretation. At any rate, it is professedly an attempt to understand the old author better than he understood himself.⁶ Historical understanding means to understand an earlier philosopher exactly as he understood him-

3. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A314/B370, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 396:

I note only that when we compare the thoughts that an author expresses about a subject, in ordinary speech as well as in writings, it is not at all unusual to find that we understand him even better than he understood himself, since he may not have determined his concept sufficiently and hence sometimes spoke, or even thought, contrary to his own intention.

4. Hermann Cohen, "Charakteristik der Ethik Maimunis," in *Jüdische Schriften*, ed. Bruno Strauss, intro. Franz Rosenzweig, 3 vols. (Berlin: C. A. Schwetschke und Sohn, 1924), 3:221–89. It first appeared in print in *Moses ben Maimon: Sein Leben, seine Werke, und sein Einfluss*, ed. W. Bacher, M. Brann, D. Simonsen, and J. Guttmann, 2 vols. (Leipzig: G. Fock, 1908–14; reprint, Hildesheim: Olms, 1971), I, pp. 63–134. For an English translation, see Hermann Cohen, *Ethics of Maimonides*, trans. Almut Sh. Bruckstein (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004). Strauss had already engaged in substantial discussion of Cohen's approach to Maimonides: see "Cohen and Maimonides," chap. 3 below, a lecture delivered (in Germany) thirteen years prior to the present lecture (delivered in the United States), i.e., 1931 versus 1944.

5. "HSMP" (1996): Strauss originally had "procedure," but it has been struck through by pencil, and for it he substitutes "interpretation." Strauss also discusses Cohen's "idealizing interpretation" in "Introduction" to *Philosophy and Law*, pp. 23–30; "Preface to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*," and "Introductory Essay to Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason*," in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, especially pp. 165–66, 271–72, with editor's remarks, pp. 18–21.

6. "HSMP" (1996): a section of this paragraph was put in square brackets in pencil, starting with "The most outstanding example" and ending with "than he understood himself." The editors of the 1996 version observe that an explanatory note appeared in the margin on a corner of the page of the manuscript, but it has been half torn away. What remains of the note is not intelligible. For the sake of readability, the brackets have been removed, since they do not seem essential to Strauss's argument in the context of the paragraph. Readers may judge for themselves.

self.⁷ Everyone who has ever tried his hand at such a task will bear me out when I say that this task is an already sufficiently tough assignment in itself.

In the normal and most interesting case, the philosopher studied by the historian of philosophy is a man by far superior to his historian in intelligence, imagination, and subtlety. This historian does well to remind himself of the experience which Gulliver had when he came in contact, through necromancy, with the illustrious dead. "I had a Whisper from a Ghost, who shall be nameless, that the Commentators of Aristotle and other great philosophers always kept in the most distant quarters from their Principals, through a Consciousness of Shame and Guilt, because they had so horribly misrepresented the meaning of those authors to Posterity."⁸ The most *sustained* effort of the most *gifted* historian hardly suffices to carry him for a short moment to the height which is the native and perpetual haunt of the philosopher: how can the historian even *dream* of reaching a point from which he can look *down* on a philosopher?⁹

For the attempt to understand a philosopher of the past better than he understood himself, presupposes that the interpreter considers his insight superior to the insight of the old author. Kant made this quite clear when suggesting that one can understand a philosopher better than he understood himself. The average historian is much too modest a fellow to raise such an enormous claim in so many words. But he is in danger of doing so without noticing it. He will not claim that his *personal* insight is superior to that of, e.g., Maimonides. But only with difficulty can he avoid claiming that the *collective* insight available today is superior to the collective insight available in the twelfth century. There is more than one historian who in interpreting, say, Maimonides, tries to assess the *contribution* of Maimonides. His contribution to what? To the treasure of knowledge and insight which has been accu-

7. "HSMP" (1996): Strauss originally had "Maimonides e.g.," but it has been struck through by pencil, and for it he substitutes "an earlier philosopher." This is, of course, one of the leitmotifs, and most original tropes, of Strauss as a reader of the great books: he called for "historical interpretation," i.e., that modern readers must strive to understand the great thinkers of the past—who are also the authors of great books—*just as* they understood themselves. See, e.g., "Political Philosophy and History," in *What Is Political Philosophy?*, pp. 56–77.

8. See Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, ed. Robert A. Greenberg (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970), p. 168, pt. III: "A Voyage to Laputa, Balnibarbi, Luggnagg, Glubbdubdrib, and Japan"; chap. VIII: "A further Account of Glubbdubdrib. Ancient and Modern History corrected."

9. This entire paragraph has been added, based on a separate sheet that was attached to the lecture manuscript. It was meant either to continue from the previous paragraph, or to stand as a separate paragraph, which last possibility is how it has been decided to present it. It is reproduced in the text of the present version of the lecture as if the flow of the argument was to have been expressed in it. However, it is not certain that this is what Strauss intended. The present version follows "HSMP" (1996); the paragraph on the separate sheet is not added to "HBSMP" (1989) either as text or as note.

mulated throughout the ages. That treasure appears to be greater today than it was, say, in the year of Maimonides' death. This means that when speaking of Maimonides' "contribution," the historian has in mind the contribution of Maimonides to the treasure of knowledge or insight as it is available *today*. Hence, he interprets Maimonides' thought in terms of the thought of the present day. His tacit assumption is that the history of thought is, generally speaking, a progress, and that therefore the philosophic thought of the twentieth century is superior to or nearer *the* truth than the philosophic thought of the twelfth century. I contend that this assumption is irreconcilable with true historical understanding. It necessarily leads to the attempt to understand the thought of the past *better* than it understood itself, and not *as* it understood itself. For it is evident that our understanding of the past will tend to be more *adequate*, the more we are *interested* in the past; but we cannot be seriously interested, i.e., passionately interested, in the past, if we know beforehand that the present is, in the most important respect, superior to the past. It is not a matter of chance that, generally speaking, the historical understanding of the continental romantics, of *the* historical school, was superior to the historical understanding of eighteenth-century rationalism; it is a necessary consequence of the fact that the representatives of the historical school did *not* believe in the superiority of their time to the past, whereas the eighteenth-century rationalist believed in the superiority of the Age of Reason to all former ages. Historians who start from the belief in the superiority of present-day thought to the thought of the past, feel no necessity to understand the past by itself: they understand it as a preparation for the present only. When studying a doctrine of the past, they do not ask primarily: what was the conscious and deliberate intention of its originator? They prefer to ask: what is the contribution of the doctrine to *our* beliefs? What is the meaning, unknown to its originator, of the doctrine from the point of view of the present? What is its meaning in the light of *later* developments? Against this approach, the historical consciousness rightly protested in the name of historical truth, of historical exactness. The task of the historian of thought is to understand the thinkers of the past *exactly* as they understood themselves, or to revitalize their thought according to their *own* interpretation of it. To sum up this point: the belief in the superiority of one's own approach, or of the approach of one's time, to the approach of the past is fatal to historical understanding.

We may express the same thought somewhat differently as follows. The task of the historian of thought is to understand the thought of the past exactly as it understood itself; for to abandon that task is tantamount to aban-

doing the only practicable criterion of objectivity in the history of thought. It is well known that the same historical phenomenon is interpreted in most different ways by different periods, different generations, and different types of men. The same historical phenomenon appears in different lights at different times. New human experiences shed light on old texts. No one can foresee, e.g., how the Bible will be read one hundred years hence. Observations such as these have led some people to adopt the view that the claim of any one interpretation to be *the* true interpretation is untenable. Yet the observations in question do not justify such a view. For the infinite variety of ways in which a given text can be understood does not do away with the fact that the author of the text, when writing it, understood it in one way only, provided he was not muddle-headed.¹⁰ The light in which, e.g., the history of Samuel and Saul appears on the basis of the Puritan revolution, is not the light in which the author of the biblical history understood that history. And *the* true interpretation of the biblical history in question is the one which restates, and makes intelligible, the biblical history as understood by the biblical author. Ultimately, the infinite variety of interpretations of an author is due to conscious or unconscious attempts to understand the author better than he understood himself; but there is only one way of understanding him *as* he understood himself.¹¹

To return to the point where I left off: the belief in the superiority of one's own approach, or of the approach of one's time, to the approach of the past is fatal to historical understanding. This dangerous assumption, which is characteristic of what one may call progressivism, was avoided by what is frequently called historicism. Whereas the progressivist believes that the present is superior to the past, the historicist believes that all periods are equally "immediate to God." The historicist does not want to *judge* the past, e.g., by assessing the contribution of each person, but rather seeks to understand and to relate how things have actually been, "*wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*,"¹² and in

10. Strauss has added in pencil, "provided he was not muddle-headed," as recorded by "HSMP" (1996).

11. "HSMP" (1996) notes that Strauss has added to the end of this paragraph a comment in pencil; it is put at the bottom of the page. It runs as follows: "Application to *sociological* interpretation: it is an attempt to understand the past better than it understood itself—it has its merits—but it is not historical understanding in the precise sense of the term."

12. "*Wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*" / "As it actually was." This is the famous remark that was made by one of the great 19th-century German historians, Leopold von Ranke, to encapsulate the proper task of modern historical study. See "Vorrede zur ersten Ausgabe," in *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1492 bis 1535* (Leipzig: Duncker und Humblot, 1885), pp. V–VIII, and especially p. VII. For a fairly literal English translation, see: "Introduction" to *History of the Latin and Teutonic Nations*, in Leopold von Ranke, *The Secret of World History: Selected Writings on the Art and Science of*

particular how the *thought* of the past has been. The historicist has at least the *intention* to understand the thought of the past exactly as it understood itself. But he is constitutionally unable to live up to his intention. For he knows, or rather he assumes, that, generally speaking and other things being equal, the thought of all epochs is equally true, because every philosophy is essentially the expression of the spirit of its time. Maimonides, e.g., expressed the spirit of his time as perfectly, as, say, Hermann Cohen expressed the spirit of *his* time. Now, all philosophers of the past claimed to have found *the* truth, and not merely the truth for their *time*. The historicist, however, asserts that they were mistaken in believing so. And he makes this assertion the basis of his interpretation. He knows a priori that the claim of Maimonides, e.g., to teach *the* truth, the truth valid for all times, is unfounded. In this most important respect, the historicist, just as his hostile brother the progressivist, believes that his approach is superior to the approach of the thinkers of old. The historicist is therefore compelled by his principle, if *against* his intention, to try to understand the past better than it understood itself. He merely repeats, if sometimes in a more sophisticated form, the sin for which he blames the progressivist so severely. For, to repeat, to understand a serious teaching, one must be seriously interested in it, one must take it seriously. But one cannot take it seriously if one knows beforehand that it is “dated.” To take a serious teaching seriously, one must be willing to consider the possibility that it is simply true. Therefore, if we are interested in an adequate understanding of medieval philosophy, we must be willing to consider the possibility that medieval philosophy is simply true, or, to speak less paradoxically,¹³ that it is superior, in the most important respect, to all that we can learn from any of the contemporary philosophers. We can understand medieval philosophy only if we are prepared to learn something, not merely *about* the medieval philosophers, but *from* them.

It remains true, then, that if one wants to understand a philosophy of the past, one must approach it in a *philosophic* spirit, with *philosophic* questions: one’s concern must be primarily, not with what other people have thought about the philosophic truth, but with the philosophic truth itself. But if one approaches an earlier thinker with a question which is not *his* central ques-

History, ed. and trans. R. Wines (New York: Fordham University Press, 1981), pp. 56–59, and especially p. 58. It is also translated (although not in any sense as literally) in: Leopold von Ranke, *The Theory and Practice of History*, ed. and trans. G. G. Iggers and K. von Moltke (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973), pp. 135–38, and especially p. 137: “The present attempt [at history] . . . merely wants to show how, essentially, things happened.”

13. Strauss has added in pencil, “to speak less paradoxically,” as recorded by “HSMP” (1996).

tion, one is bound to misinterpret, to distort, his thought. Therefore, the philosophic question with which one approaches the thought of the past must be so broad, so comprehensive, that it permits of being narrowed down to the specific, precise formulation of the question which the author concerned adopted. It can be no question other than the question of *the* truth about the whole.

The historian of philosophy must then undergo a transformation into a philosopher or a conversion to philosophy, if he wants to do his job properly, if he wants to be a competent historian of philosophy. He must acquire a freedom of mind which is not too frequently met with among the professional philosophers: he must have as perfect a freedom of mind as is humanly possible. No prejudice in favor of contemporary thought, even of modern philosophy, of modern civilization, of modern science itself, must deter him from giving the thinkers of old the *full* benefit of the doubt. When engaging in the study of the philosophy of the past, he must cease to take his bearings by the modern signposts with which he has grown familiar since his earliest childhood; he must try to take his bearings by the signposts which guided the thinkers of old. Those old signposts are not immediately visible: they are concealed by heaps of dust and rubble. The most obnoxious part of the rubble consists of the superficial interpretations by modern writers, of the cheap clichés which are offered in the textbooks and which seem to unlock by one formula the mystery of the past. The signposts which guided the thinkers of the past must be *recovered* before they can be used. Before the historian has succeeded in recovering them, he cannot help being in a condition of utter bewilderment, of universal doubt: he finds himself in a darkness which is illumined exclusively by his knowledge that he knows nothing. When engaging in the study of the philosophy of the past, he must know that he embarks on a journey whose end is completely hidden from him: he is not likely to return to the shore of his time as the same man who left it.

II. True historical understanding of medieval philosophy presupposes that the student is willing to take seriously the claim of the medieval philosophers that they teach *the* truth. Now, it may justifiably be objected, is this demand not most unreasonable? Medieval philosophy is based, generally speaking, on the natural science of Aristotle: has that science not been refuted once and for all by Galileo, Descartes, and Newton? Medieval philosophy is based on practically complete unawareness of the principles of religious toleration, of the representative system, of the rights of man, of democracy as we un-

derstand it. It is characterized by an indifference touching on contempt to poetry and history. It seems to be based on a firm belief in the verbal inspiration of the Bible and in the Mosaic origin of the oral Law. It stands and falls with the use of a method of biblical interpretation as unsound as the allegoric interpretation. In brief, medieval philosophy arouses against itself all convictions fostered by the most indubitable results of modern science and modern scholarship.

Nor is this all. Medieval philosophy may have been refuted by modern thought, and yet it could have been an admirable and highly beneficial achievement for its time. But even this may be questioned. A strong case can be made for the view that the influence of philosophy on medieval Judaism was far from being salutary. Most of you will have read the remarkable book by Dr. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*.¹⁴ Dr. Scholem contends that from the point of view of Judaism, i.e., of rabbinical Judaism, the Kabbalah is by far superior to Jewish medieval philosophy. He starts from the observation that

both the mystics and the philosophers completely transform the structure of ancient Judaism. . . . [But] the philosopher can only proceed with his proper task after having successfully converted the concrete realities of Judaism into a bundle of abstractions. . . . By contrast, the mystic refrains from destroying the living structure of religious narrative by allegorizing it. . . . The difference becomes clear if we consider the attitude of philosophy and Kabbalah respectively to the two outstanding creative manifestations of Rabbinical Jewry:

14. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1941, 1946, 1954). Strauss and Scholem maintained a five-decades-long friendship (the 1920s through the 1970s), fascinating elements of which are revealed in their surviving letters; for the complete edition of their correspondence, see *Hobbes Politische Wissenschaft und zugehörige Schriften—Briefe*, vol. 3 of *Gesammelte Schriften*, pp. 699–771. A French translation of the complete correspondence has appeared: *Cabale et philosophie: Leo Strauss et Gershom Scholem Correspondance 1933–73*, trans. Olivier Sedeyn (Paris: Eclat, 2006). For a sketch of crucial aspects in the contours of their friendship, see Steven B. Smith, “Gershom Scholem and Leo Strauss: Notes toward a German-Jewish Dialogue,” in *Reading Leo Strauss: Politics, Philosophy, Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 43–64. And for Scholem’s testimony to their unique friendship, in his letter to Strauss’s widow, Miriam, of December 13, 1973, consider the following:

In Leo Strauss we have lost a man whose intellectual power I treasured above all others in this generation. Though our life trajectories and intellectual assumptions contrasted greatly, for years we had the secure feeling that we shared a deep fraternity far beyond intellectual differences. In my mind’s eye I have the image of a thinker of immense depth, precision, and integrity who made an indelible impression on his pupils, many of whom I have met over the years.

See Gershom Scholem, *A Life in Letters, 1914–1982*, ed. and trans. Anthony David Skinner (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 455; *Hobbes Politische Wissenschaft und zugehörige Schriften—Briefe*, vol. 3 of *Gesammelte Schriften*, p. 772.

Halakhah and Aggadah, Law and Legend. It is a remarkable fact that the philosophers failed to establish a satisfactory and intimate relation to either. . . . The whole world of religious law remained outside the orbit of philosophical inquiry, which means of course, too, that it was not subjected to philosophical criticism. . . . For a purely historical understanding of religion, Maimonides' analysis of the origin of the *mitzwoth*,¹⁵ the religious commandments, is of great importance, but he would be a bold man who would maintain that his theory¹⁶ of the *mitzwoth* was likely to increase the enthusiasm of the faithful for their actual practice. . . . To the philosopher, the Halakhah either had no significance at all, or one that was calculated to diminish rather than to enhance its prestige in his eyes. . . . The Aggadah . . . represents a method of giving original and concrete expression to the deepest motive-powers of the religious Jew, a quality which helps to make it an excellent and genuine approach to the essentials of our religion. However, it was just this quality which never ceased to baffle the philosophers of Judaism. . . . Only too frequently their allegorizations are simply . . . veiled criticism.¹⁷

Scholem does not leave it at suggesting that our medieval philosophers were, qua philosophers, blind to the deepest forces of the Jewish soul; he suggests also that they were blind to the deepest forces of the soul of man as man. Philosophy, he says, turned "its back upon the primitive side of life, that all-important region where mortals are afraid of life and in fear of death, and derive scant wisdom from rational philosophy."¹⁸ The Kabbalists, on the other hand, "have a strong sense of the reality of evil and the dark horror that is about everything living. They do *not*, like the philosophers, seek to evade its existence with the aid of a convenient formula."¹⁹

We ought to be grateful to Dr. Scholem for his sweeping and forceful condemnation of our medieval philosophy. It does not permit us to rest satisfied with that mixture of historical reverence and philosophic indifference which is characteristic of the prevailing mood. For Scholem's criticism, while un-

15. "HSMP" (1996): Strauss omits the transliterated Hebrew word "*mitswoth*" as used by Scholem.

16. "HSMP" (1996): Strauss used the word "ideology" instead of the word "theory" used by Scholem. The original has been restored, although readers should consider whether Strauss's change was deliberate, and if so, what his point may have been. Scholem speaks about the "ideology of Judaism" on p. 23: both philosophy and mysticism "tend to produce an ideology of Judaism, an ideology moreover which comes to the rescue of tradition by giving it a new interpretation."

17. See Scholem, *op. cit.*, pp. 23, 26, 28-31.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 36. "HSMP" (1996) notes that Strauss has underlined the word "*not*" in Scholem's phrase "They do not, like the philosophers," while Scholem himself did not underline this word.

usually ruthless, cannot be said to be paradoxical. In fact, to a certain extent, Scholem merely says quite explicitly what is implied in the more generally accepted opinion on the subject. The central thesis underlying the standard work on the history of Jewish philosophy, Julius Guttman's *The Philosophy of Judaism*, is that our medieval philosophers abandoned, to a considerable extent, the biblical ideas of God, world, and man in favor of the Greek ideas, and that the modern Jewish philosophers succeed much better than their medieval predecessors in safeguarding the original purport of the central religious beliefs of Judaism.²⁰ In this connection we might also mention the fact that Franz Rosenzweig considered Hermann Cohen's posthumous work, *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*,²¹ to be definitely superior to Maimonides' *The Guide of the Perplexed*.²²

Criticisms such as these cannot be dismissed lightly. Nothing would be more impertinent than to leave things at a merely dialectical or disputative answer. The only convincing answer would be a real *interpretation* of our great medieval philosophers. For it would be a grave mistake to believe that we dispose already of such an interpretation. After all, the historical study of Jewish medieval philosophy is of fairly recent origin. Everyone working in this field is deeply indebted to the great achievements of Salomon Munk, David Kaufmann, and Harry A. Wolfson in particular. But I am sure that these great scholars would be the first to admit that modern scholarship has

20. See Julius Guttman, *Die Philosophie des Judentums* (Munich: E. Reinhardt, 1933). For an English translation, see *Philosophies of Judaism*, trans. David W. Silverman (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1964). See also "Der Streit der Alten und der Neueren in der Philosophie des Judentums (Bemerkungen zu Julius Guttman, *Die Philosophie des Judentums*)," in *Philosophie und Gesetz: Beiträge zum Verständnis Maimunis und seiner Vorläufer* (Berlin: Schocken Verlag, 1935), pp. 30–67; *Philosophie und Gesetz: Frühe Schriften*, vol. 2 of *Gesammelte Schriften*, pp. 29–66; "The Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns in the Philosophy of Judaism: Notes on Julius Guttman, *The Philosophy of Judaism*," in *Philosophy and Law*, pp. 41–79. A recent edition of this same English translation of Guttman's book has brought at least the title closer to that name by which Guttman designated it himself, both in its original German form and in the Hebrew translation which represented his own revision of the original work: *Philosophy of Judaism: The History of Jewish Philosophy from Biblical Times to Franz Rosenzweig*, trans. David W. Silverman (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1988); however, while it restores the singular ("*Philosophy*"), it drops the definite article at the beginning of Guttman's own title ("*The Philosophy*"). For contemporary assessments of the legacy of Guttman's approach to Jewish philosophic thought, see Jonathan Cohen, *Philosophers and Scholars: Wolfson, Guttman, and Strauss on the History of Jewish Philosophy*, trans. Rachel Yarden (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007); Steven Harvey, "The Value of Julius Guttman's *Die Philosophie des Judentums* for Understanding Medieval Jewish Philosophy Today," in *Studies in Hebrew Literature and Jewish Culture*, ed. Martin F. J. Baasten and Reinier Munk (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), pp. 297–308.

21. In the lecture manuscript, Strauss has used the original German title, *Religion der Vernunft*.

22. I have not been able to trace, thus far, the source of Franz Rosenzweig's judgment on Hermann Cohen's *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism* as "definitely superior" to Maimonides' *The Guide of the Perplexed*.

not yet crossed the threshold of such works as Halevi's *Kuzari* and Maimonides' *Guide*: "*Ben Zoma 'adayin bahuz*.'" ²³ We are still in a truly preliminary stage.

But quite apart from this perhaps decisive consideration, the critical remarks quoted can be answered to a certain extent without raising the gravest issue. Dr. Scholem takes it for granted that our medieval philosophers intended to express, or to interpret, in their philosophic works, the living reality of historical Judaism, or the religious sentiments or experiences of the pious Jew. Their real intention was much more modest, or much more radical. The whole edifice of the Jewish tradition was virtually or even actually under attack from the side of the adherents of Greek philosophy. With all due caution necessitated by our insufficient information about what happened in the Hellenistic period of Jewish history, one may say that the Middle Ages witnessed the first, and certainly the first *adequate*, discussion between these two most important forces of the Western world: the religion of the Bible and the science or philosophy of the Greeks. It was a discussion, not between ethical monotheism and paganism, i.e., between two religions, but between religion as such and science or philosophy as such: between the way of life based on faith and obedience and a way of life based on free insight, on human wisdom, *alone*. What was at stake in that discussion were not so much the religious sentiments or experiences *themselves*, as the elementary and inconspicuous *presuppositions* on the basis of which those sentiments or expe-

23. "HSMP" (1996): a Hebrew phrase ("*Ben Zoma 'adayin bahuz*") completes Strauss's sentence. Hillel Fradkin transliterated Strauss's Hebrew for the text of "HSMP" (1996), and also translated the phrase in a note: "Ben Zoma is still outside." As the editors add, the source is a phrase from Babylonian Talmud, Hagigah 15a; most apposite, it is also used by Maimonides in *Guide* 3.51. (The same passage in which the phrase first appeared is also a theme of 1.32 and 2.30.) Maimonides employs it as a proof-text in his parable of "the ruler in his palace," for scholars who "are only engaged in studying the mathematical sciences and the art of logic," and who as a result "walk around the house searching for its gate." They never locate the door and so never enter the ruler's palace. This puts such scholars on par with "the jurists who believe true opinions on the basis of traditional authority and [who] study the law" on matters of practice, but who do not reach the level of theory with regard to "the fundamental principles of religion" and "the rectification of belief." If Strauss was thinking of Maimonides in his use of this talmudic phrase, he seems to suggest that "the historical study of Jewish medieval philosophy," whatever the "greatness" of its "achievements" in a "preliminary" sense, has actually (in the words of Maimonides) "not yet crossed the threshold" of "the ruler's habitation." In other words, it is far removed from the core of what the medieval philosophic thinkers actually thought, and has not yet penetrated to that deeper level. Strauss's focus on the *proper* study of medieval philosophy, and especially of the Jewish medieval philosophy on which his lecture primarily concentrates, is thus concerned with directing historical scholars to how to locate "the gate" of "the ruler's palace." It offers the hope that this might ultimately help them at least to begin to "cross the threshold," i.e., to break through to the concealed core, as he tacitly claimed to do with his immensely subtle, often difficult, and yet truly radical readings of precisely "Halevi's *Kuzari* and Maimonides' *Guide*."

riences could be more than beautiful dreams, pious wishes, awe-inspiring delusions, or emotional exaggerations. It was very well for the Kabbalist Moses of Burgos to say that the philosophers end where the Kabbalists begin.²⁴ But does this not amount to a confession that the Kabbalist as such is not concerned with the *foundations* of belief, i.e., with the only question of interest to the philosopher as philosopher? To deny that this question is of paramount importance is to assert that a conflict between faith and knowledge, between religion and science, is not even thinkable, or that intellectual honesty is nothing to be cared for. And to believe that the specific experiences of the mystic are sufficient to quell the doubts raised by science or philosophy is to forget the fact that such experiences guarantee the absolute truth of the Torah in no other way than that in which they guarantee the absolute truth of the Christian dogma or of the tenets of Islam; it means to minimize the importance of the doctrinal conflicts among²⁵ the three great monotheist religions. In fact, it was the insoluble character of those doctrinal conflicts which engendered, or at any rate strengthened, the impulse toward philosophic studies. (It is perhaps not altogether insignificant that Jewish philosophy has proved to be much more impervious to the influence of the Christian dogma than the Kabbalah.)²⁶

One may say, of course—and this is the implication of the view taken by Guttman and Rosenzweig in particular—that modern Jewish philosophy has discussed the question of faith and knowledge, of religion and science, in a much more advanced, in a much more mature, way than medieval Jewish philosophy. At the root of all our internal difficulties is, after all, the conflict between the traditional Jewish beliefs and, not Aristotelian metaphysics, but modern natural science and modern historical criticism. And this conflict is being discussed, of course, not by *medieval* Jewish philosophy, but by *modern* Jewish philosophy. Yet there is another side to this picture. Modern Jewish philosophy from Moses Mendelssohn to Franz Rosenzweig stands

24. For Moses of Burgos and his statement discussed by Strauss, see Scholem, *op. cit.*, p. 24. Of course, it cannot but remind one of Newton's famous remark (in a letter to Robert Hooke, of February 5, 1676): "If I have seen a little further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants." But Moses of Burgos did not aim to honor his predecessors even while clearly surpassing them, as Newton did: his distinct aim was to reduce the pretensions of the philosophers (like Maimonides), who perhaps do not even look around open-mindedly, as the mystics do; hence they are not aware of, and certainly they cannot discover, the realms in the mind, in the world, and in God imagined by the Kabbalists.

25. The original manuscript has "between"; I follow "HBSMP"(1989) by substituting for it "among."

26. The original manuscript has the last sentence in the paragraph surrounded by square brackets, added in pencil; I follow "HBSMP"(1989) by substituting for them conventional parentheses.

and falls with the basic premises of modern philosophy in general. Now, the superiority of modern philosophy to medieval philosophy is no longer so evident as it seemed to be one or two generations ago. Modern philosophy led to a distinction, alien to medieval philosophy, between philosophy and science. This distinction is fraught with the danger that it paves the way for the admission of an unphilosophic science and of an unscientific philosophy: of a science which is a mere tool, and hence apt to become the tool of any powers, of any interests that be, and of a philosophy in which wishes and prejudices have usurped the place belonging to reason. We have seen modern philosophy resigning the claim to demonstrable truth and degenerating into some form of intellectual autobiography, or else evaporating into methodology by becoming the handmaid of modern science. And we are observing every day that people go so far in debasing the name of philosophy as to speak of the philosophies of vulgar impostors such as Hitler. This regrettable usage is not accidental: it is the necessary outcome of the distinction between philosophy and science, of a distinction which is bound to lead eventually to the *separation* of philosophy from science. Whatever we might have to think of neo-Thomism, its considerable success among non-Catholics is due to the increasing awareness that something is basically wrong with modern philosophy. The old question, discussed in the seventeenth century, of the superiority of the moderns to the ancients, or vice versa, has again become a topical question. It has again become a *question*: only a fool would presume that it has already found a sufficient answer. We are barely beginning to realize its enormous implications. But the mere fact that it has again become a question suffices for making the study of medieval philosophy a philosophic, and not merely a historical, necessity.

I would like to stress one point which is of particular significance for the right approach to medieval philosophy. The development of modern philosophy has led to a point where the meaningfulness of philosophy or science as such has become problematic. To mention only one of its most obvious manifestations: there was a time when it was generally held that philosophy or science is, or can, or ought to be the best guide for social action. The very common present-day talk of the importance and necessity of political *myths* alone suffices to show that, at any rate, the *social* significance of philosophy or science has become doubtful. We are again confronted with the question, Why philosophy? Why science? This question was in the center of discussion in the beginnings of philosophy. One may say that the Platonic dialogues serve no more obvious purpose than precisely this one: to answer the ques-

tion, Why philosophy? Why science?, by justifying philosophy or science before the tribunal of the city, the political community. In fundamentally the same way, our medieval philosophers are compelled to raise the question, Why philosophy? Why science?, by justifying philosophy or science before the tribunal of the law, of the Torah. This most fundamental question of philosophy, the question of its own legitimacy and necessity, is no longer a question for modern philosophy. Modern philosophy was from its beginning the attempt to replace the allegedly wrong philosophy or science of the Middle Ages by the allegedly true philosophy or science: it did not raise any longer the question of the necessity of philosophy or science *itself*; it took that necessity for granted. This fact alone can assure us from the outset that medieval philosophy is distinguished by a philosophic radicalism which is absent from modern philosophy, or that it is, in the most important respect, superior to modern philosophy.²⁷ It is then not altogether absurd that we should turn from the modern philosophers to the medieval philosophers with the expectation that we might have to learn something *from* them, and not merely about them.

III. The student of medieval philosophy is a modern man. Whether he knows it or not, he is under the influence of modern philosophy. It is precisely this influence which makes it so difficult and, to begin with, even impossible, really to understand medieval philosophy. It is this influence of modern philosophy on the student of medieval philosophy which makes an *unhistorical* interpretation of medieval philosophy, to begin with, inevitable. The understanding of medieval philosophy requires, then, a certain *emancipation* from the influence of modern philosophy. And this emancipation is not possible without serious, constant, and relentless *reflection* on the specific character of *modern* philosophy. For knowledge alone can make men free. We modern men understand medieval philosophy only to the extent to which we understand *modern* philosophy in its specific character.

This cannot possibly mean that the student of medieval philosophy must possess a complete knowledge of all important medieval and modern philosophies. The accumulation of such a vast amount of knowledge, of factual information, if at all possible, would reduce *any* man to a condition of mental

27. "HSMP" (1996): the major portion of this paragraph in the original manuscript was put in square brackets in pencil, starting with "I would like to stress" and ending with "superior to modern philosophy." For the sake of readability, the brackets have been removed, since they do not seem essential to Strauss's argument in the context of the paragraph. Readers may judge for themselves.

decrepitude. On the other hand, it is impossible for any genuine scholar to rely on those *fables convenues*²⁸ about the difference between medieval and modern thought which have acquired a sort of immortality by migrating from one textbook to another. For even if those clichés were true, the young scholar could not know that this is the case: he would have to accept them on trust. There is only one way of combining the duty of exactness with the equally compelling duty of comprehensiveness: one must start with detailed observations at strategic points. There are cases, e.g., in which a medieval work has served as a model for a modern work: by a close comparison of the imitation with its model, we may arrive at a clear and lively firsthand impression of the characteristic difference between the medieval approach and the modern approach. As an example one could mention Ibn Tufayl's *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*.²⁹ Defoe's work is based on the Latin translation, made in the seventeenth century, of the work of the Arabic philosopher.³⁰ Both works deal with the question of what a solitary human being can achieve with his natural powers, without the help of society or civilization. The medieval man succeeds in becoming a perfect philosopher; the modern man lays the foundation of a technical civilization. Another type of strategic point is represented by modern commentaries on medieval texts. A comparison of Mendelssohn's commentary on Maimonides' *Treatise on Logic* with the Maimonidean text itself could well perform the function of an entering wedge into our subject.³¹ The third type would be detailed modern

28. "*Fables convenues*" may be translated (or rather defined)—although somewhat unsatisfactorily—as "conventional fables." I suppose their colloquial rendering might be somewhat closer to the contemporary phrase "urban legends."

29. See Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Tufayl [also Ibn Tufail] (1105–85), *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*, trans. George N. Atiyeh, in *Medieval Political Philosophy*, ed. Lerner and Mahdi, pp. 134–62. The Atiyeh translation, for all of its virtues, is not the work complete in itself, but only selected sections. For a complete translation, see *Ibn Tufayl's Hayy ibn Yaqdan: A Philosophical Tale*, trans. Lenn Evan Goodman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). See also *The Journey of the Soul: The Story of Hai bin Yaqzan*, trans. Riad Kocache (London: Octagon, 1982). For the 1719 work by Daniel Defoe (1660–1731), see *Robinson Crusoe*, ed. Michael Shinagel (New York: Norton, 1994); *Robinson Crusoe*, ed. Thomas Keymer, with notes by Thomas Keymer and James Kelly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). Although Strauss's original spelling of the title is *Yaqdhân*, I have standardized it as *Yaqzan*, in accord with contemporary scholarly conventions.

30. Edward Pococke, the great English Orientalist and Arabic scholar (and author also of *Porta Moses*, the first Latin translation of selected portions of Maimonides' Arabic-language *Commentary on the Mishnah*), made the first Latin translation of Ibn Tufayl's *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* in 1660. It appeared in print in 1671. George Ashwell made the first English translation, drawn from the Latin translation of Pococke; it appeared in 1686. And Simon Ockley made the first English translation of *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* based on the Arabic original, which appeared in 1708.

31. For a translation of Strauss's brief introduction to selections from Mendelssohn's commentary on Maimonides' *Treatise on the Art of Logic*, see *Leo Strauss on Moses Mendelssohn*, trans. and ed. Martin D. Yaffe (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

polemics against medieval teachings, such as Spinoza's critique of Maimonides' teaching and method in the *Theologico-Political Treatise*. By observing what theses of Maimonides are misunderstood or insufficiently understood by Spinoza, one is enabled to grasp some of the specifically modern prejudices which, to begin with, prevent us, at least as much as they did Spinoza, from understanding Maimonides. Yet all examples of the three types mentioned are open to the objection that they may mislead the unwary student into taking the difference between these specific modern and medieval philosophies for *the* difference between modern philosophy as such and medieval philosophy as such.

To grasp that general difference, there is, I think, no better way than a precise comparison of the most typical divisions of philosophy or science in both the Middle Ages and the modern period. It is easy to compile a list of the philosophic disciplines which are recognized today, from the curricula of present-day universities, or from the title pages of systems of philosophy composed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Compare that list with, say, Alfarabi's or Avicenna's division of philosophy. The differences are so big, they are so appallingly *obvious*, that they cannot be overlooked even by the most shortsighted person; they are so obtrusive that they compel even the most lazy student to *think* about them.³² One sees at once, e.g., that there do not exist in the Middle Ages such philosophic disciplines as aesthetics or philosophy of history, and one acquires at once an invincible and perfectly justified distrust of the many modern scholars³³ who write articles or even books on medieval aesthetics or on medieval philosophy of history. One becomes interested in the question: when did the very terms "aesthetics" and "philosophy of history" appear for the first time? One learns that they made their first appearance in the eighteenth century; one starts reflecting on the assumptions underlying their appearance—and one is already well on one's way. Or take the absence of a discipline called "philosophy of religion" from medieval philosophy. How many books and pamphlets have been written on Jewish philosophy of religion in the Middle Ages, on something, that is, which strictly speaking does not exist. Something must be basically wrong with all these books and pamphlets. In the place of our modern philoso-

32. According to "HSMP" (1996), an entire sentence has been struck through by pencil: "Such a study is even more exciting than the reading in a first-class historical dictionary." It follows "think about them."

33. "HSMP" (1996): the phrase "*nomina sunt odiosa*" has been struck through by pencil, following "modern scholars." The phrase means "Names are odious or hateful." It implies: "I shall not stoop to mentioning (infamous) names." It was used by Cicero, and it became a Latin proverb.

phy of religion, we find in medieval philosophy theology as a philosophic discipline, *natural* theology as it was formerly called. There is a world of difference between natural theology, the philosophic doctrine of *God*,³⁴ and philosophy of religion, the analysis of the *human attitude* toward God. What is the meaning of that difference? What does it mean that the greatest work of medieval Christianity is entitled “*Summa Theologica*,” whereas the greatest work of the Reformation is entitled “*Institutio Christianae Religionis*”? And what does it mean that Maimonides excludes the discussion of *religious* subjects from his *Guide*?³⁵ This is exactly the type of questions with which one has to *start* in order to arrive eventually at a true, exact, historical understanding of medieval philosophy.

Many scholars consider the type of questions which I have mentioned as pedantic, not to say bureaucratic. They would argue as follows: why should we not describe a medieval philosopher’s remarks on poetry, e.g., as his contribution to aesthetics? The medieval philosopher would have considered those remarks as belonging to poetics, or to ethics, or perhaps even to political science. He conceived of poetry as an essentially purposeful activity, as an activity destined to please by instructing or to instruct by pleasing. He conceived of poetics as a technical art destined to teach how to make good poems, etc. He considered poetry essentially subservient to ulterior purposes such as moral improvement. In short, he had a terribly narrow view of poetry. Thanks to our modern philosophers, we know better: we know that poetry is something existing in its own right, and that aesthetics, far from teaching a poet how to make poems, is the analysis of poetic productivity and of aesthetic enjoyment or appreciation or understanding. The modern view being so manifestly superior to the medieval view, why should we hesitate for a moment to refer the medieval philosopher’s remarks on poetry to *our* center of reference, and hence to describe them as belonging to aesthetics? Well, this is precisely the mental habit which makes impossible historical understanding of medieval philosophy. If we know from the outset that the medieval view of the matter is wrong or poor, we should not waste our time in studying it; or if someone does not mind wasting his time, he simply will not command the intellectual energy required for truly understanding a view for which he cannot have any real sympathy. Since I mentioned this example of aesthetics versus poetry, I may be permitted to add that the medieval view of poetry

34. “HSMP” (1996): the word “philosophic” has been added.

35. See *Guide* 3.8, p. 436; and compare with “Literary Character,” chap. 8 below. In the previous sentence, the former work is by Thomas Aquinas, and the latter work is by John Calvin.

ultimately goes back to Plato's *Republic*, i.e., to the work of a man who cannot be accused of having had a monkish lack of sense of beauty.³⁶

The implication of the point I have been trying to make is that *terminology* is of paramount importance. Every term designating an important subject implies a whole philosophy. And since, to begin with, one cannot be certain which terms are important and which terms are not, one is under an obligation to pay the utmost attention to any term which one reads, or which one uses in one's presentation. This naturally brings us to the question of *translations*. There is no higher praise for a translation of a philosophic book than that it is of utmost literalness, that it is in *ultimimate literalitatis*, to avail myself of the Latinity of those wonderful medieval translators whose translations from the Arabic into Hebrew or from either language into Latin infinitely surpass most modern translations I know,³⁷ although their Latin in particular is frequently in *ultimimate turpitudinis*.³⁸ It is difficult to understand why many modern translators have such a superstitious fear of translating literally. It leads to the consequence that a man who has to rely entirely on modern translations of philosophic works, is unable to reach a precise understanding of the thought of the author. Accordingly, even the poorest linguists (such as the present speaker) are compelled to read the originals. This was not so in the Middle Ages. Medieval students of Aristotle, who did not know a word of Greek, are by far superior as interpreters of Aristotle to modern scholars, who possess a simply overwhelming knowledge of Greek antiquities. This superiority is decisively due to the fact that the medieval commentators disposed of most literal translations of the Aristotelian text and that they stuck to the text and the terminology of the text.

IV. The foregoing remarks apply to the study of medieval philosophy in general. Now let us turn to Jewish medieval philosophy in particular. Medieval Jewish philosophy consists broadly of two types, an earlier type which flour-

36. "HSMP" (1996): the entire preceding paragraph in the original manuscript was put in square brackets in pencil, starting with "Many scholars consider" and ending with "a monkish lack of sense of beauty." For the sake of readability, the brackets have been removed, since they do not seem essential to Strauss's argument in the context of the paragraph. Readers may judge for themselves.

37. "HSMP" (1996): the words "with the exception of Schleiermacher and Salomon Munk," following "modern translations I know," have been struck through by pencil. On other occasions Strauss praised their translations, even if not their interpretations.

38. If Strauss translates the Latin phrase "*ultimimate literalitatis*" as "of utmost literalness," so it is perhaps best to translate the Latin phrase *ultimimate turpitudinis* as "of utmost shamefulness." My thanks to Sara Kathleen Alvis for her advice on how best to translate the phrase. In her notes to me she was careful to add: "these phrases do not seem to be classical Latin."

ished in an Islamic environment, and a more recent type which emerged in a Christian environment. I shall limit myself to the older type, which is more interesting from the point of view of our methodological question, to say nothing of other considerations. There are specific difficulties obstructing our understanding of Arabic-Jewish philosophy, as well as of the Islamic philosophy on which it is dependent. History of philosophy, as distinguished from doxography, is an outgrowth of the modern world. Its program was stated for the first time by Francis Bacon.³⁹ Originally it was considered as something outside of philosophy proper, as a pursuit for antiquarians rather than for philosophers: it became an integral part of philosophy in the nineteenth century only, owing to Hegel in particular. History of philosophy, being an outgrowth of Christian Europe, has a congenital inclination to take its bearings as regards the study of medieval philosophy by the standards of Christian or Latin scholasticism. The student of medieval philosophy, as a modern man, is prevented by the influence of modern philosophy on his thought from understanding medieval philosophy, if he does not coherently reflect on the difference between modern and medieval philosophy. Similarly, the student of Islamic and Jewish philosophy, who as a historian of philosophy participates in a tradition of *Western* origin, is prevented by that tradition from understanding Islamic and Jewish philosophy, if he does not coherently reflect on the difference between Christian scholasticism and Islamic-Jewish philosophy.

One has to start from the difference between Judaism and Islam on the one hand, and Christianity on the other. For the Jew and the Muslim, religion is primarily not, as it is for the Christian, a *faith* formulated in dogmas, but a *law*, a *code* of divine origin. Accordingly, *the* religious science,⁴⁰ the *sacra doctrina*, is not dogmatic theology, *theologia revelata*, but the science of the law, *halakha* or *fiqh*. The science of the law thus understood has much less in common with philosophy than has dogmatic theology. Hence the status of philosophy is, as a matter of principle, much more precarious in the Islamic-Jewish world than it is in the Christian world. No one could become a competent Christian theologian without having studied at least a substantial part

39. With regard to Francis Bacon as grounding the modern history of philosophy, perhaps Strauss was thinking of the third division of the six divisions planned for his "Great Instauration" of the sciences. It appeared in plan only as a fragment, appended as a sort of addendum to Bacon's *The New Organon*: "Preparative toward Natural and Experimental History." See *The New Organon and Related Writings*, ed. Fulton B. Anderson (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1960), pp. 271-92. See also Fulton B. Anderson, *The Philosophy of Francis Bacon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), pp. 34-35.

40. "HSMP" (1996): "the religious science" has "*the*" underlined.

of philosophy; philosophy was an integral part of the officially authorized and even required training. On the other hand, one could become an absolutely competent halakhist or faqih⁴¹ without having the slightest knowledge of philosophy. This fundamental difference doubtless explains the possibility of the later complete collapse of philosophic studies in the Islamic world, a collapse which has no parallel in the West in spite of Luther. It explains why, as late as 1765, the Ashkenazic Jew Mendelssohn felt compelled to offer a real apology for recommending the study of logic, and to show why the prohibition against the reading of extraneous or profane books does not apply to the study of works of logic. It explains at least partly why Maimonides' *Guide* in particular never acquired the authority enjoyed by Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*. Nothing is more revealing than the difference between the beginnings of these two most representative works. The first article of Thomas's great *Summa* deals with the question as to whether theology is necessary apart from, and in addition to, the philosophic disciplines: Thomas defends theology before the tribunal of philosophy. Maimonides' *Guide*, on the other hand, is explicitly⁴² devoted to the science of the law, if to the *true* science of the law; it opens in the form of⁴³ a somewhat diffuse commentary⁴⁴ on a biblical verse;⁴⁵ it opens as a defense of philosophy before the tribunal of traditional Jewish science rather than as a defense of traditional Jewish science before the tribunal of philosophy. Can one even imagine Maimonides opening the *Guide* with a discussion of the question as to whether the *halakha* is necessary in addition to the philosophic disciplines? Maimonides' procedure is illustrated by a treatise of his contemporary Averroes, the explicit purpose of which is the *legal* justification of philosophy: it discusses in *legal* terms, in terms of the Islamic law, the question as to whether the study of philosophy is *permitted* or *forbidden* or *commanded*.⁴⁶ Philosophy

41. In both cases, it designates a "scholar of the law" in the sense of one who is both knowledgeable in, and competent to render decisions about, the law.

42. "HSMP" (1996): "is explicitly" has been substituted for "claims to be" in Strauss's original manuscript.

43. "HSMP" (1996): as an alternative on top of the line containing the words "it opens in the form of," Strauss wrote "Its first chapters look like."

44. "HSMP" (1996): as an alternative on top of the line containing the word "commentary," Strauss wrote ("a *midrash*").

45. "HSMP" (1996): added on top of the line containing the word "biblical verse," Strauss wrote "which verse." The verse discussed by Maimonides, to which Strauss refers, is Genesis 1:26. See *Guide* 1.1, pp. 21–23. In this context one must notice that Maimonides is solely addressing himself to correct scriptural exegesis, rather than any legal inferences from the text.

46. See Averroes, *Decisive Treatise*, trans. Charles E. Butterworth (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2001), p. 1. As it seems to me, it is of this work that Strauss was almost certainly thinking.

was clearly on the defensive, not so much perhaps in fact, but certainly as far as the legal situation was concerned. There is more than one parallel to Averroes' argument in Jewish literature.

The problematic status of philosophy in the Jewish Middle Ages finds its most telling expression in the use of the terms "philosophy" and "philosopher." We take it for granted that men such as Maimonides and Halevi were philosophers, and we call their respective books without hesitation philosophic books. But do we act in agreement with their view of the matter by doing so? In their usage, philosopher designates normally a man whose beliefs are fundamentally different from those of the adherents of any of the three monotheist religions, whether he belongs nominally to one of these religions or not. The philosophers as such are supposed to form a group, a *sect*, fundamentally distinguished from the group [or sect] of the Jews, that of the Muslims, and that of the Christians.⁴⁷ By calling thinkers such as Halevi and Maimonides "philosophers," we implicitly deny that there is a *problem* in the very *idea* of a Jewish philosopher or of Jewish philosophy. But of nothing were these men more deeply convinced than of this, that Jewish philosophy is, as such, something problematic, something precarious.⁴⁸

Now let us consider the other side of the picture. The official recognition of philosophy in the Christian world doubtless had its drawbacks. That recognition was bought at the price of the imposition of strict ecclesiastical supervision. The precarious position of philosophy in the Islamic-Jewish world, on the other hand, guaranteed, or necessitated, its *private* character, and therewith a higher degree of inner *freedom*. The situation of philosophy in the Islamic-Jewish world resembles in this respect its situation in classical Greece. It has often been said that the Greek city was a totalitarian social order: it comprised and regulated, not only political and legal matters proper, but morality, religion, tragedy, and comedy as well. There was, however, one activity which was, in fact and in theory, essentially and radically *private*, transpolitical, and transsocial: philosophy. The philosophic schools were founded, not by authorities civil or ecclesiastical, but by men *without au-*

47. "HBSMP" (1989) has "the sect of the Jews, that of the Muslims, and that of the Christians." According to "HSMP" (1996), it should be: "the group of the Jews, that of the Muslims, and that of the Christians." The present version assigns priority to "group," but retains "sect" in qualifying square brackets.

48. For the point at which Strauss became aware of this issue, and or least the point at which he consciously ceased to employ that terminology in his own works, cf. appendix below to the present book, "The Secret Teaching of Maimonides."

thority, by private men. In this respect, I said, the situation of philosophy in the Islamic world resembles the *Greek* situation rather than the situation in Christian Europe. This fact was recognized by the Islamic-Jewish philosophers themselves: elaborating on a remark of Aristotle, they speak of the philosophic life as a radically *private* life: they compare it to the life of a hermit.⁴⁹

Religion is conceived by Muslims and Jews primarily as a law. Accordingly, religion enters the horizon of the philosophers primarily as a *political* fact. Therefore, the philosophic discipline dealing with religion is not philosophy of religion, but political philosophy or political science. The political science in question is a specific one: Platonic political science, the teaching of Plato's *Republic* and of his *Laws*. No difference between Islamic-Jewish philosophy on the one hand and Christian scholasticism on the other is more palpable than this: whereas *the* classic of political science in the Western world was Aristotle's *Politics*, the classics of political science in the Islamic-Jewish world were the *Republic* and the *Laws*. In fact, Aristotle's *Politics* was unknown to the Islamic-Jewish world,⁵⁰ and the *Republic* and the *Laws* made their appearance in Christian Europe not before the fifteenth century.

The Islamic law as well as the Jewish law is, of course, considered a divine law, a law given by God to men by the intermediary of a prophet. The prophet is interpreted by Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Maimonides in terms of the Platonic philosopher-king: as the founder of the perfect political community. The doctrine of prophecy as such is considered by these philosophers a part of political science. Avicenna describes Plato's *Laws* as the standard work on prophecy. This view of the essentially political character of prophecy influences the very plan of Maimonides' *Sefer ha-Mitzvot* and of his *Sefer ha-Madda*.⁵¹ Its implications appear from Maimonides' remark that the neglect

49. Besides Ibn Tufayl's *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* and Abu Bakr ibn Bajja's *The Regimen of the Solitary* (*Tadbir al-Mutawahhid*), one might also consider the seemingly passing, but actually pointed, comments of Maimonides in *Guide* 2.36, pp. 371–72. See also Pines, "Translator's Introduction," in *Guide*, pp. cvi–cviii.

50. Cf. also "Maimonides Doctrine of Prophecy," chap. 4 below, n. 191; "Some Remarks on the Political Science of Maimonides and Farabi," chap. 5 below, n. 5.

51. Maimonides' *Sefer ha-Mitzvot* [Book of Commandments], as a separate book, is an effort to enumerate and arrange in order the traditional 613 laws of the Torah, the first such effort ever ventured. With regard to his *Sefer ha-Madda* [The Book of Knowledge], it is the first of fourteen volumes of his code of law, the *Mishneh Torah*, in which he discusses not only the practical requirements of the law, but also its theoretical grounds or fundamental principles, which was an unprecedented endeavor, and which produced much controversy. The *Mishneh Torah* as an entirety is an effort to classify, categorize, and assemble the laws in logical order and by rational plan, rather than by the associative or "organic" form of talmudic

of the arts of war and of conquest in favor of astrology led to the destruction of the Jewish state.⁵²

The difference between Islamic-Jewish philosophy and Christian scholasticism shows itself most clearly in the field of practical philosophy. As regards theoretical philosophy, both Islamic-Jewish philosophy and Christian scholasticism build on substantially the same tradition. But in political and moral philosophy, the difference is fundamental. I have mentioned the absence of Aristotle's *Politics* from the Islamic-Jewish world. Equally significant is the absence from it of the Roman literature, of Cicero, and the Roman Law in particular. This leads to the consequence that the doctrine of natural law, so characteristic of Christian scholasticism, and indeed of Western thought up to the end of the eighteenth century, is completely lacking in Islamic-Jewish philosophy: it appears in some later Jewish writers only under the influence of Christian thought. It is true, the Islamic theologians, the *mutakallimun*, had asserted the existence of rational laws which were practically identical with what were called natural laws in the Occident; but the Islamic-Jewish philosophers reject this view altogether. The rules of conduct which are called by the Christian scholastics natural laws, and by the *mutakallimun* rational laws, are called by the Islamic-Jewish philosophers generally accepted opinions. This view appears in the Christian Middle Ages only at their fringes, as it were, in the teaching of Marsilius of Padua, the most energetic medieval opponent of clerical claims.⁵³

This leads me to the last point which I would like to make in order to indicate the extent and bearing of the difference separating Islamic-Jewish philosophy from Christian scholasticism, and in order to justify my contention that a genuine understanding of Islamic-Jewish philosophy must be based on constant awareness of that difference. That school of Christian scholasticism, which was most deeply influenced by Islamic philosophy, was Latin Averroism. Latin Averroism is famous for its doctrine of the double truth, for its assertion that a thesis may be true in philosophy but false in theology and vice versa. The doctrine of the double truth does not occur in Averroes himself or in his predecessors. Instead, we find in Islamic philosophy a relatively ample use of the distinction between exoteric teachings, based on rhetorical argu-

literature. See "Review of *The Mishneh Torah*, Edited . . . by Moses Hyamson," chap. 7 below; and "Notes on Maimonides' *Book of Knowledge*," chap. 12 below.

52. See "Note on Maimonides' *Letter on Astrology*," chap. 14 below. See also "On Abravanel's Philosophical Tendency and Political Teaching," chap. 15 below.

53. See Leo Strauss, "Marsilius of Padua," in *History of Political Philosophy*, ed. Strauss and Cropsey, 3rd ed., pp. 276–95. It is reprinted in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, pp. 185–202.

ments, and esoteric teaching, based on demonstrative or scientific arguments. Up to now, students of Islamic philosophy have not paid sufficient attention to this distinction, which is evidently of absolutely decisive importance. For if the true, scientific teaching is an esoteric, a *secret*, teaching, we have no right to be as⁵⁴ certain as we are accustomed to be that the public teaching of the Islamic philosophers is their real teaching. We would have to acquire a special technique of reading not necessary for the understanding of books which set forth the views of their authors directly, without any concealment or circumlocution. It would be wrong to trace the esotericism in question to certain spurious phenomena of dying antiquity: its origin has to be sought in Plato himself, in the doctrine of the *Phaedrus* concerning the superiority of oral teaching to teaching by writings, in the doctrine of the *Republic* and the *Laws* concerning the necessity of noble lies, and, above all, in the literary technique used by Plato himself in all his works. One may safely say that before this *Platonism* of the Islamic philosophers has been duly studied, our understanding of Islamic philosophy rests on extremely shaky foundations. Similar considerations apply to the Jewish philosophy which is dependent on Islamic philosophy. Everyone who has read the *Guide* knows how emphatically Maimonides insists on the secret character of his own teaching: he warns his reader from the outset that he has set forth only the chapter headings of the secret teaching, and not the chapters themselves.⁵⁵ In the *Kuzari*, we are confronted with a similar situation: the final conversion of the Kuzari to Judaism is the consequence of his listening to a highly secret interpretation of the secret teaching of the *Sefer Yetzira*.⁵⁶ It was with a view to phenomena such as these that I ventured to say that our understanding of medieval philosophy is still in a truly preliminary stage. In making this remark, I do not minimize the debt which we owe to Harry A. Wolfson and Isaac Heinemann in particular, who have spoken on the peculiar literary technique of our medieval philosophers⁵⁷ on various occasions. What is required, beyond

54. "HSMP" (1996): as an alternative on top of the line containing the word "as," Strauss wrote "so."

55. See *Guide* 1.Intro., pp. 6–7.

56. See Leo Strauss, "The Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*," in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, p. 119, n. 70, which makes the same point.

57. "HSMP" (1996): "our medieval" has been bracketed in pencil, with the word "earlier" written on top of the line apparently as an alternative. With respect to the highlighting of Isaac Heinemann and Harry A. Wolfson, it is not clear which works Strauss had in mind by mentioning their names. Heinemann produced much significant scholarly work on medieval Jewish thought, and its relation to Greek and Roman thought; especially impressive and enduring is his work on the "reasons for the commandments" in the history of medieval Jewish thought. See Isaak Heinemann, *Die Lehre von der Zweckbestimmung des Menschen im griechisch-römischen Altertum und im jüdischen Mittelalter* (Breslau: H. & M. Mar-

the general observations, is a coherent and methodic application of those observations to the actual interpretation of the texts. Only after this interpretation has been completed will we be in a position to judge of the *value*, of the *truth*, of our medieval philosophy. For the time being, it is good policy to suspend our judgment and to *learn* from these great teachers. For there are many important lessons which modern man can learn only from premodern, from unmodern, thinkers.

cus, 1926). See also Yizhak Heinemann, *Ta'amei ha-mitzvot be-sifrut Yisra'el* (1st ed., 1942; reprint, Yerushalayim: Horev, 1993); *The Reasons for the Commandments in Jewish Thought: from the Bible to the Renaissance*, trans. Leonard Levin (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2008). At least in the section on Maimonides (*Reasons*, trans. Levin, pp. 95–119), Heinemann is acutely aware of the literary subtlety that characterizes this approach. But perhaps most apposite was his *Altjüdische Allegoristik* (Breslau: M. & H. Marcus, 1935); his work in this area was advanced, with greater focus on the medievals, in an article that Strauss would seem not to have been able to know (if the present lecture was finalized during the 1940s): “Die wissenschaftliche Allegoristik des jüdischen Mittelalters,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 23 (1950): 611–43; for Maimonides especially, pp. 628–31. With respect to Wolfson, he produced no major scholarly work dedicated to medieval Jewish philosophy in its aspect as literature; his book on Hasdai Crescas is concerned mainly with medieval criticism of Aristotelian physics: *Crescas's Critique of Aristotle: Problems of Aristotle's Physics in Jewish and Arabic Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1929). His articles on such medieval Jewish thinkers as Halevi and Maimonides are usually focused on a specific philosophical or theological topic. But perhaps Strauss was thinking of Wolfson's true historical magnum opus, i.e., *The Philosophy of Spinoza: Unfolding the Latent Processes of His Reasoning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934), even though it is not a work on a medieval writer, or on a philosophic writer who emerged from the historical context to which Strauss points. It begins with two chapters which especially deal with literary considerations as needful for uncovering the philosophic thought of Spinoza, whose historical sources are “concealed” in his *Ethics*, even if unconsciously so: “Behind the Geometrical Method,” and “The Geometrical Method,” pp. 3–60. With regard to the historical and literary method of Wolfson in the aforementioned book, Strauss advanced several substantive criticisms: see “How to Study Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*,” in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, pp. 181–233, especially pp. 214–16; or in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, pp. 142–201, especially pp. 188–90.